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ABSTRACT

Both the increased frequency of divorce and the resultant increase in single-parent households have experienced dramatic increases since World War II. In many instances, divorce is a major disruptive experience that imposes primary impact upon all family members. Characteristically, various levels of adjustment are required of family members amid experiences that are novel and for which those involved are possibly not well-prepared. Human services practitioners may best direct their efforts toward providing a reframing approach to parents and children experiencing divorce. There is evidence that children from single-parent families are good decision-makers and that they have strengths and maturities associated with their experiences related to divorce. Professionals may be able to facilitate the cognitive reframing of parents and children in such a way that hopefulness and a sense of assurance and control can be implemented and sustained. This report was written to: (1) integrate what is known about divorce-associated responses in children; (2) promote a reframing approach in focusing on that which may be evaluated as positive and contributing to present well-being and future successes of the children; and (3) guide practitioners as they work both programmatically and in direct service with children of divorce. (Author/NB)

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Children of Divorce: Facilitating Well-Being

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Abstract

Both the increased frequency of divorce and the resultant increase in single-parent households have experienced dramatic increases since World War II. In many instances, divorce is a major disruptive experience that imposes primary impact upon all family members. Characteristically, various levels of adjustment are required of family members amid experiences that are novel and for which those involved are possibly not well-prepared.

It may be that our efforts can be best directed toward providing a reframing approach to parents and children experiencing divorce. For instance, there is evidence that children from single-parent families are good decision-makers and that they have strengths and maturities associated with their experiences related to divorce. It seems to our advantage as professionals to be able to facilitate the cognitive reframing of parents and children in such a way that hopefulness and a sense of assurance and control can be implemented and sustained.

The purpose of this article is 1) to integrate what is known about divorce-associated responses in children; 2) to promote a reframing approach in focusing on that which may be evaluated as positive and contributing to present well-being and future successes of those children; and 3) to guide practitioners as they work both programmatically and in direct service with children of divorce.

Children of Divorce: Facilitating Well-Being

Both the increased frequency of divorce and the resultant increase in single-parent households have experienced dramatic increases since World War II. Incidents of divorce have tripled in the past three decades. In 1962 413,000 divorces were recorded in the United States; 845,000 occurred in 1972; 1.2 million divorces were reported in 1982. It is now a general consensus that an estimated 40% of marriages among young adults will fail (Drake & Shallenberger, 1981).

Schmid (1986) reported the percent of children from divorced homes to have been 9% in 1960 and 12% in 1970. While it was projected in 1982 (Pett) that by 1990 11% of all children would experience the divorce of their parents, more recent Census Bureau figures indicate that nearly one-fourth of children under 18 today live with only one parent. According to Hurley, Taylor, & Riley (1984), nearly one-half of today's children will experience the divorce of their parents.

Of significance to those in the fields of mental health and education is the widely-held observation that children of divorce often display concurrent behavioral and academic changes. In the typical American classroom, one of five children comes from a divorce-resultant single-parent household (Drake & Shallenberger, 1984; Wodarski, 1982). In some school districts, rates of incidence may be even greater. In one California school district, it was discovered that of 1,000 students in a particular building, 90% were from single parent families (Drake & Shallenberger, 1981).

Immediate divorce-associated needs of children may affect not only the present but also long-range needs as well. Hepworth, Ryder, and Dreyer (1984) investigated the long-term effects of parental loss associated with divorce. They found that later intimate relationships are influenced and that compensatory behavior in adolescents is manifested in one of three ways. Relationships may be 1) avoided, 2) characterized by premature or accelerated courtship patterns, or 3) engaged in by "mock intimacy" in which a series of casual noncommittal relationships are manifested.

Thus, one may speculate that it is possible, and perhaps probable, that today's children of divorce will experience divorce and single-parent realities as adults. The systemic changes brought about by escalating divorce rates have cyclical and compounding properties. Examining

what is currently known about the effects of divorce on children and considering specific elements of those treatment models that contribute to healthy adjustment in some children may enhance professional awareness and guide theorists and practitioners in further investigation and refinement of technique. Mental health professionals and educators can be directed toward providing approaches and programs that optimally address the needs of children experiencing the divorce of their parents and resultant single-parent family lifestyles.

Most professionals agree that the school environment provides a logical place in which to provide programs for these children. Drake and Shallenberger (1981) assert that children "spend more time in schools than in any other institution outside the family" and that "the schools would appear to provide a natural setting for supportive services for children experiencing separation and divorce" (p. 55). Williams (1984) also agrees that "schools are in a unique position to help alleviate stress among families experiencing divorce by recognizing their special needs and spearheading group support, counseling, and mediation programs for parents and students" (p. 24).

Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, and McLaughlin (1983), however, raise a key issue in asserting that while "school-based support for children of divorce is a priority intervention," there is currently lacking "a detailed understanding of school related criteria and school environments that may promote positive adjustment" (p. 304).

The purpose of our manuscript is 1) to integrate what is known about divorce-associated responses in children; 2) to promote a reframing approach by focusing on that which may be evaluated as positive and contributing to present well-being and future successes of those children; and 3) to guide practitioners as they work both programmatically and in direct service with children of divorce.

Divorce as a Major Disruptive Experience

Divorce is a major disruptive experience that imposes primary impact upon all family members. Systemic changes result. Characteristically, various levels of adjustment are required of family members amid experiences that are novel and for which they are possibly not prepared. Changes can be classified among several categories: 1) primary psychological or emotional responses with accompanying behavioral manifestations; 2) geographic changes influencing and/or compounding adjustment processes; 3) systemic alterations; and 4) economic issues affecting phenomenological adjustment.

Primary Psychological or Emotional Adjustment Responses and Accompanying Behavioral Manifestation

Both parents and children are subject to psychological and behavioral modifications subsequent to divorce. Levintin (1979) summarized the research on the divorce process and concluded that severe stress and disorganization are experienced by families in the first post-divorce year. Mothers and fathers were found to possess feelings of incompetency, loneliness, alienation, and depression. Behaviorally, it was indicated that divorced parents were less likely to make maturity demands on children, to be consistent in discipline, to reason with children, to communicate effectively with them, or to be affectionate with them. Life-style changes thus impact the emotional schemata of the custodial parent and are manifested behaviorally in parent-child relationships.

Behavioral manifestations are frequently observed and noted in children experiencing the divorce of their parents because of the resultant changes in family structure. Some research indicates that these children exhibit "higher levels of dependent, disobedient, aggressive, demanding, unaffectionate, and whining behaviors" (Guidubaldi, et al., p. 302). Drake and Shallenberger (1981) noted marked changes in the behavior of some children which may include restlessness, obstinate acts, disruptiveness, and impulsiveness. Magrab (1978) promoted the belief that children are stressed by divorce/separation and exhibit behaviors typically associated with anxiety.

Documented emotional responses in children indicate a potentially wide range of feelings. Confusion, anger, guilt, fear, and depression are possible as well as cognitively-based notions of insecurity, isolation, shame, and a sense of being different (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1977). Magrab (1978) also asserts that emotionally children experience a phenomena similar to that of a loss following death. Denial, anger, and eventual acceptance are thought to be part of the total schemata but are manifested differently in individual cases, depending upon a number of factors. The notion is that feelings of separation anxiety intermingled with feelings of helplessness and rejection are frequent. Depression and its associated symptomotology are likely to appear as well.

Warren, Ilgen, Grew, Konanc, and Amara (1985) conceptualize divorce as a process occurring over time and requiring a series of adaptations. Attempting to account for the variable of time, data from a 15 year longitudinal study indicates that symptoms of stress are manifested in the five-year

period following divorce but that no significant differences between children experiencing parental divorce and children not experiencing parental divorce remain at 15 years post-divorce. A second study cited by Warren, Grew, Ilgen, Konac, Van Bourgondien, And Amara (1984) indicates that children show major adjustment and improvement within two and a half years post-divorce. A frequently promoted approach is that of referring to the one-year period following divorce as the "crisis period." It is suggested that successful adjustments by children can and do occur post-divorce.

Two primary questions are thus raised: 1) What variables are detrimental to or enhance psychological and behavioral post-divorce adjustment potential in children? 2) Can these be extrapolated and effectively addressed in post-divorce intervention designed to facilitate adjustment in children?

Geographic and Systemic Modifications

In a 1982 study by Schlesinger, it was noted that 40% of children having experienced parental divorce had moved to new neighborhoods. Thus, divorce adjustment in children may be complicated by lateral changes associated with new environments. For many, the reality of parental divorce necessitates changes in schools, neighborhoods, and peers. Church and/or other affiliatory connections may be disrupted, altered, or discontinued.

Changes such as modified interaction patterns and basic structural alterations frequently occur in the primary family unit following divorce. These changes extend beyond the obvious absence of one parent as noted by Schlesinger in his observation that one parent replaces two in most cases and that the non-custodial parent is seen less.

Responsibilities and duties associated with the home and family are reorganized and reassigned during and subsequent to transition. It appears that compensatory efforts are made in adjustment to the absence of one parent and the modified role of the other. Extended family relationships undergo change as well. Schlesinger further noted that over 70% of subjects indicated decreased contact with the paternal extended family.

In homes where custody is awarded to the mother, the necessity of maternal employment may create a reality whereby she is less available for guidance and supervision (Schlesinger, 1982). As reported by older siblings, surrogate compensatory parenting behaviors may emerge in response to the modified mother and now-absent father. Cited are responsibilities such as the giving of advice, disciplining of siblings, teaching sports, sitting at the head of the table, and

teaching about and discussing sex. Some children report working part-time and paying for clothing, caring for younger siblings, playing a paternal role, and/or being a listening post for the parent. Pragmatically, children may now find it necessary to fix things around the house, to shop for food, to cook, and to clean (Schlesinger, 1982).

Economic Issues That Significantly Impact Phenomenology

While divorce may signal an end to or impasse in inter-parental conflict and battling, a new battle emerges and perhaps is sustained indefinitely as the mother struggles to survive economically. Wodarski (1982) observed that "the most critical aspect of the divorce process appears to be loss of income for the [custodial] mother with children" (p. 313). The average loss in family income sustained by a custodial mother with children in the United States is 74%, and two-thirds of divorced females report significantly lowered household income.

Glick (1979) cited divorce as the most common cause of single-parent households. Since 1970, such households have increased by 11%; in 90% of them, a female functions as head (Guidubaldi, et al., 1983). One in seven families living in the United States is headed by a female with no husband present. Two-thirds of female-headed and single-parent families live below the poverty level (U. S. Dept. of Commerce, 1981).

While conducting research on the children of divorce in an attempt to provide more definitive conclusions about the impact of parental divorce and to resolve earlier conflicting data, Guidubaldi, et al. (1983) noted an unexpected finding: nationwide random sampling comparing intact and divorced families indicated a significant difference in income. The median income for the intact sample was between $25,000 and $29,999. The median income for the divorced sample was between $10,000 and $14,999.

Pett (1982) noted similar findings. She studied 206 single-parent families (411 children) where divorce had occurred within the past two years and found that 58% reported incomes ranging from $5,000 to $15,000 per year. Another 25% reported incomes of less than $6,000 per year. Less than 5% reported earnings in excess of $40,000 per year. What is currently labeled "the feminization of poverty" may complicate and intensify the needs of the children of divorce in our culture. Research suggests that a 50% drop in family income is significantly related to psychological maladjustment in children and behavioral difficulties in school (Wodarski, 1983). Noting the detrimental psychological effects of poverty upon the child of divorce, Bilge and Kaufman (1983) observe that "the poor or working-class child starts out feeling secure and as he grows

older he observes the contempt society has for him" (p. 68).

Being cognizant of such findings, related to the economic impact of divorce, may guide practitioners in direct service intervention as well as influencing programmatic endeavors in agencies and schools. It may be that successful post-divorce adjustment in children is better facilitated with additional emphasis placed upon the employment needs of the custodial parent. Career counseling and vocational guidance seem appropriate in conjunction with other types of intervention. Politically, a humanistic position assumed by professional organizations and individuals that is supportive of Equal Opportunity and concern for human welfare as priority items should be forwarded.

Facilitating the Adjustment of Children to Divorce

It is contended in the bulk of published research that some common identifiable factors contribute to the ability of the child to adjust post-divorce. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) identified seven variables as having a positive effect upon the child's ability to adjust. They noted 1) parental ability to resolve post-divorce conflict and anger; 2) ability of the custodial parent to successfully resume the parenting role; 3) ability of the non-custodial parent to keep a mutually satisfying relationship with the child; 4) personality characteristics of the child and the ability to develop coping skills; 5) the ability of the child to find and use support systems; 6) diminished depressive or angry responses by the child; and 7) age and sex of the child. Overall, they assert that children who view consequences as within their locus of control and who accurately comprehend interpersonal relationships are more likely to accomplish positive adjustment.

Guidubaldi et al. (1983) noted the following specific characteristics in children who adjust well to parental divorce: 1) having earlier and regular bedtimes; 2) viewing less television; 3) participating in organized after-school activities; 4) having more contact with the non-custodial parent; 5) being encouraged by parent and teachers to engage in hobbies and to strive for academic excellence; 6) having parents who are less likely to use strong discipline or rejecting child-rearing practices; and above all, 7) attending school in safe, orderly, and predictable environments.

Pett (1982) examined family correlates of children's social adjustment following divorce. She suggests that the most significant factor related to the satisfactory social adjustment of children is a positive relationship with the custodial parent. Further, greater social adjustment in parents is significantly related to greater social adjustment in children. However, it is interesting to note

significantly related to greater social adjustment in children. However, it is interesting to note that she did not find a definitive relationship between the child's social adjustment and his/her relationship with the non-custodial parent. This differs from most other research.

Pett also charges that economic issues have an indirect effect on the child's social adjustment by virtue of their impact upon the custodial parent. She proposes that sound and timely intervention is necessary. According to her, children who resolve whatever initial conflicts they have concerning the divorce score significantly higher regarding satisfactory post-divorce adjustment.

Wodarski (1982) focused on the parent as facilitator of adjustment in children also. According to this work, a custodial parent who exhibits consistent discipline and develops a parenting strategy of warmth, clearly defined rules, and extensive verbal compromise facilitates the adjustment of his/her children. Most helpful to children is the custodial parent who does not maintain or increase his\her negative view of the ex-spouse and does not blame the partner for the dissolution. A parent who holds positive attitudes toward the ex-spouse and establishes satisfactory visitation rights will do much to enhance the adjustment of his/her children.

Considering the excellent findings of the various researchers cited and in view of our own experiences, it is our opinion that perhaps the following parental characteristics are central to the satisfactory adjustment of children to divorce: 1) low pre- and post-divorce inter-parental conflict and generally positive relations between parents; 2) general agreement between separated parents with regard to child rearing techniques; 3) the effective use of support systems and reduced level of stress with positive adjustment relative to the divorce by the custodial parent; 4) authoritative management style executed by the custodial parent; 5) availability of the non-custodial parent post-separation; and 6) open discussion between parent and child.

Criticism of Research

Obviously, much can be learned via the examination of what is known and written about the effect divorce has upon children and those factors common among children and families that appear to adjust well. However, it is important to note that the research upon which such notions have been based and promoted is not without criticism. Frequent and perhaps valid criticism of research methodology is found. Implications can be gleaned by those whose objective it is to provide effective intervention strategy.

While most of the research investigating the adjustment of children to parental divorce is based upon the assumption that it is the divorce per se or the breaking up of the family unit to which

adjustments must be made, a differing perspective is offered by Emery (1982). Emery argues that "much of the association between divorce and child behavior problems may well be attributable to a frequently overlooked third variable" (p. 314). In this conceptualization, it is interparental conflict that is cited as the basis for compensatory adjustment behaviors in children rather than the separation of parents per se. Emery cautions that the expectation that marital turmoil causes behavior problems in children may not only create biased rating data but may also be problematic in that a self-fulfilling prophecy may result.

Magrab (1978) hints at a notion similar to that of Emery. He charges that "It is a commonly held belief that children of divorce are at a greater risk, . . . but most studies in comparing children of divorce with children of intact homes rarely include the effects of living in intact unhappy homes" (p. 235).

Emery (1982) notes three of the most common problems perceived by him in the research on marital and child difficulties as they relate to one another. Cited as a primary methodological flaw is the use of biased sampling techniques. His concern is that divorce impacted families are studied with infrequent inclusion of and comparison to intact families. Non-independent data, where judges of child behavior are aware of the marital status of parents, is a second concern of Emery and is used to support the notion that fore-knowledge creates a self-fulfilling prophecy effect, obscuring valid results. Called for are refined methods of measurement supported by the assertion that those in current use lack reliability and validity.

Guidubaldi et al. (1983) criticize limited data-gathering procedures, biased sampling, and inadequate controls as "serious methodology weaknesses" (p. 300). They also feel that restricted sampling is a principal methodological concern. They charge that much work in the area subject to this weakness "cannot be generalized to the total population" (p. 303). According to them, samples are frequently small, based on ambiguous criteria, and limited to specific settings or geographical areas. It is also noted that samples almost exclusively represent Caucasian, middle and upper class families where the mother is the custodial parent. They underscore the notion that potential environmental mediating variables are overlooked and not controlled for in methodology.

They also attribute major limitations of previous research to inadequate psychometric measurement tools. Cited specifically is a lack of "psychometrically adequate indices of school age children's cognitive and social competencies" (p. 303) necessary for comparative analysis of cognitive and social changes during the adjustment period.

More generally, the Guidubaldi et al. (1983) researchers are critical of the amount and quality of research done in the area, noting that "it is surprising that so little has been done to provide an empirical understanding of the impact of parental divorce on children" (p. 300). Cited also is a lack of longitudinal research that discriminates between crises-related effects and long-term impact. However, it is noted that some work such as that of Wallerstein and Kelly (1979) is now emerging.

Of major significance is the assertion supported by the Guidubaldi et al. (1983) study that divorce adjustment in children is contingent upon a complex interactive component unique to individuals experientially. They contend that "the interaction of familial, social, cultural, economic, legal, and psychological systems with the experience and effects of divorce has not been adequately documented" (p. 301).

Similarly, the Lamb (1977) study concludes that while children of divorced parents, compared with children of intact homes are definitely "at risk [re psychological difficulty], it is not possible to specify flatly the effects of divorce, because there are no sequelae that can be identified as the inevitable consequences of divorce and family dissolution" (p. 171).

It is hoped that interested professionals will continue to critically examine what is written, pursue research with the objective of refinement, and attempt to further extrapolate variables and refine psychometric tools that will enhance research efforts. Meanwhile, interventions based upon what is known, tempered by critical analysis of established data, may comprise our best effort to facilitate post-divorce adjustment in children.

<u>In What Ways Can School Personnel and Mental Health Professionals Align and Provide Services to Facilitate Single Parents and the Children of Divorce?</u>

As societal changes are experienced, schools must now anticipate having more pupils from single-parent, low-income families. Consideration for the individual needs of these children, and their families as well, must be given priority as continued focus is placed upon educational reform in the United States. Through this alignment, a greater number of children and their parents can be facilitated in an effective manner toward the end goals of enhanced adjustment processes and subsequent and continued well-being. Parents and children who have achieved these goals are more likely to contribute to and experience academic successes that will be of benefit to society-at-large.

With increasing frequency, the view is expressed that schools should provide services to this identified special needs population. According to Drake and Shallenberger (1981), adults polled in

a 1980 Gallup survey indicated that teachers should have special training to deal effectively with the problems of children from divorced or single-parent families. Specifically endorsed were the availability of school counseling personnel during the evening hours for parents who work during the day and the provision of after-school activities so that children may avoid going home to an empty house. They emphasize that educating children to their fullest potential is jeopardized when unresolved emotional issues exist. They also observe that school-based intervention strategies are just beginning to appear in the literature and that little evaluative information is available. Based on our review of current literature, it appears that this is true.

Drake and Shallenberger (1981) assert that schools are obligated to recognize and act upon the knowledge they possess regarding children of divorce. They suggest three general intervention strategy approaches: direct, indirect, or preventive. They contend that all effective approaches, however, are and should be based upon a primary first step, divorce-specific assessment.

Assessment at dual levels is recommended. They suggest that a focused interview should assess individual needs and dictate intervention strategy at the interpersonal level. In addition, assessment of the particular school population is necessary. The following questions should be addressed: 1) What percentage of the school population is comprised of children who have experienced parental divorce and live in single-parent families? 2) What modifications of school services and procedures are in order? 3) What, if any, special services are warranted?

Direct services can be provided through individual and group counseling. Individual counseling, provided by school guidance personnel or by referral as appropriate, may be child-focused or systemically oriented. Williams (1984) has suggested that a mediation approach, with focus upon obtaining parental cooperation in helping the child, is effective. In her work with school children and divorced parents, she claims success in working to enhance communication between the parents. She further claims that her role may be that of a "mouthpiece" for the child.

Counseling groups, in and out of school environments, may facilitate the adjustment of children as well. When difficulties are noted by school personnel, children may be referred to groups focusing upon coping during the crises period, stress-management, facing and dealing with losses, facilitating self-disclosure, and communication skills. The benefits of group counseling in general are well-known to practitioners and do not warrant further explanation here.

In addition to more obvious direct services, schools are in a unique position to provide indirect services that may be helpful to children affected by divorce as well to those who work with these

children. Drake and Shallenberger (1981) suggest training programs that are directed toward increasing the sensitivity of school personnel to the needs of children of divorce. Teacher in-service time may be appropriately used to this end (Williams & Hoffman, 1984). Mental health professionals and university related service providers could be instrumental in teaching guidance counselors to work with children individually and in groups. Skills and knowledge necessary may include the ability to recognize and address typical and atypical effects of divorce upon children, associated behavioral manifestations, factors that affect the degree of trauma experienced by the child, and appropriate and useful methods of assessment and psychometric tools.

Modifications in school curriculum could effectively address the phenomena in an indirect manner also. Suggested possibilities are social studies units that address family dynamics as influenced by societal changes. Courses at the secondary level in child development and effective parenting are potentially useful indirect approaches.

Parental involvement and referral to appropriate service providers may also indirectly enhance the well-being of children in the school environment. Parents may benefit from support groups and parenting classes among other services. School counselors can serve as important and effective liaisons and mediaries in their role as referral agents.

Preventive services are a third avenue worthy of serious consideration by school personnel. According to Drake and Shallenberger (1981), curriculum changes and additions that facilitate the ability of children to understand change in their lives and to develop coping mechanisms for change are useful in preparing them for changes in their own lives and in the lives of others. Programs that increase self-disclosure and sensitivity to others may likewise help children cope with and understand personal and societal changes.

Conclusions

Using what each of us knows (or what we believe we know) to plan for and help children experiencing parental divorce and associated changes is to be encouraged. However, caution is warranted. It is the tendency in our society to view the one-parent family as pathological. Historically, the intact nuclear family has supported our values structure in society-at-large. Viewing the decline of the nuclear family as the cause of child pathology may be erroneous and may be subject to self-fulfilling prophecy properties that are detrimental to the goal of enhancing the well-being of these children.

Research indicates that divorce can lead to "different" but not necessarily "disturbed" patterns

of development (Kurdak & Siesky, 1978). Some data indicates that the stress experienced by a child during and subsequent to parental divorce is not primarily attributable to the break-up and to the resulting single-parent family experience but rather to the turmoil of parental conflict experienced before, during, and after the divorce (Emery, 1982; Schlesinger, 1982). The removal of tension and fear from the home environment subsequent to divorce may actually enhance child development (Kurdak & Siesky, 1978).

Schlesinger (1982) asserts that the "myths about divorce are distorted" (p. 6). It is noted that unhappiness, anxiety, fear, and hostility manifested by divorcing parents may affect children rather than the divorce, per se. A custodial parent with a positive social network of family and friends and a satisfactory relationship with the non-custodial parent will enhance the adjustment of his/her children.

It may be that our efforts can be best directed toward providing a reframing approach to parents and children experiencing divorce. There is evidence that children from single-parent families are good decision-makers and that they have strengths and maturities associated with their experiences. It seems to our advantage as professionals to be able to facilitate the cognitive reframing of parents and children in such a way that hopefulness and a sense of assurance and control can be implemented and sustained.

School personnel and mental health professionals can be instrumental in the reframing process. As highlighted by Bilge and Kaufman (1983), whether or not the escalation of divorce incidence and resultant single-parent households become disastrous and detrimental to society-at-large depends upon the "availability of sufficient material resources, supportive social networks, and . . . culturally-structured attitudes toward it" (p. 17).

Bilge and Kaufman (1983) also provide a linkage between children of divorce and children living in intact homes. "The well-being of children in any society can be assessed impressionistically by the adequacy of the nurturing, love and training they receive in preparation for the roles they eventually must play as adults, and by the resources and opportunities available to them for achieving dignity and respect as human beings in the society to which they belong" (p. 71).

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